Dada & its philosophy

Dada is one of the major art movements that influences people's perspectives to understand a new world in terms of art in the 20th century. It challenges warfare and rational logic and it uses violent and brutal way of artistic expression to find the solution to human problems. In this paper, I will focus on two key texts in order to further the discussion on Zurich Dada and Berlin Dada: Walter Benjamin's writing 'The work of art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' (1935) and Tristan Tzara's article 'Dada Manifesto 1918'. In addition, I will also apply the artistic practice of Hannah Hoch's famous painting 'Cut with the Kitchen Knife Dada' (1919) to the main argument of these two texts. I will put the emphasis on arguing how the Dada art movement breaks down the distant relations between artists and general public, art and media.

In his most influential writing 'Illuminations: The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', Benjamin analyzes the relationship between political, technological and artistic development under capitalist society. In his opinion, the mode of artistic production is determined in large part by the level of technological development at the time. With the advent of mechanical reproduction, Benjamin claims that art lost its 'aura' when it was reproduced through mechanical reproduction instead of mass production for an event that occurred only once. Furthermore, he also mentions two types of value that artworks have. The one is cult value and another is exhibition value. In his viewpoint, based on the exhibition value, artworks have a new function which is more accessible to the masses. Benjamin wrote 'mechanical reproduction emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual'. 1 Another important idea that I found in Benjamin's article was that he mentions slow motion and other techniques by the camera which will enable people to see the hidden details in objects and artworks. To respond to this point, I also found the evidence from the film 'ENTR'ACTE (1924) by Rene Claire and Francis Picabia, in which artists combined music with film and captured the slow motions of ballet dancers. It is important to acknowledge that this piece of Benjamin's writing was written in the most turbulent era in Germany since the Nazis came to power in 1933. During that period, the rise of technology enabled high-tech warfare which brought mass destruction in WWII. This historical context had a significant impact on Benjamin's idea and writing.

On the other hand, Tristan Tzara's writing 'Dada Manifesto 1918' marked the narrative of the Dada movement and it celebrated the new history of anti-bourgeois freedom in art. This piece was written during the period when Europe experienced WW I, in which industrialization had enabled the manufacture of evolving war machines. The goal of Zurich Dada artists was to destroy the bourgeois culture and to fight against social convention. Compared to the traditional approach of painting by avant-garde artists, Dada artists used chaotic and nonsense performances as well as accidental art to express that art was uncontrolled by reason. Besides his claim that art creation is a process that abolishes logia and Dada is the creation of nothing, Tzara also addresses the dissolution of meaning and the embrace of total expression as a creation to the violence of WW I. For example, Tzara said “how can one expect to put order into the chaos that constitutes that infinite and shapeless variation: man? The principle: 'love thy neighbor' is a hypocrisy”.2 It reminds me of how WW I's mass production of weaponry brought mass scale casualties in the battlefield. Under this specific historical background, Dadaists assume that the body and the world are fragmented objects. This argument can find its evidence from Hannah Hoch's painting where she dramatized the destruction of the relationship between human bodies and machines by using collages on canvas.

Hannah Hoch was among the Berlin Dada group who rejected warfare, imperialism and capitalism. Berlin Dada emerged during the period that Germany experience many social problems such a high unemployment rate and great depression. In 1919, there were political, social and ethnic tensions and the German socialist revolution fails. Afterwards, the German Weimar government came into power, and it transformed Germany from Communism toward a

1 Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', 1935
more socially democratic nation. In her artwork, Hoch aimed to produce the newly constructed image, developing her anti-
art aesthetic by working with mass-produced images. By creating the new images, she used photomontage, a technique
that makes a composite photograph by cutting newspapers and magazines into pieces and recombining them. This
technique violated avant-garde artists' traditional way of artistic representation.

To Hoch, photomontage was used politically to question the claim of both photography and language, as used in the press,
to represent reality. By observing her artwork, I realized that words could be clipped from the headlines from magazines
thus destabilizing the conventional relations of visual and verbal modes. In a deeper sense, Hoch re-contextualized
photographs of Weimar Republic leaders and politicians from magazines in order to parody them. This 'engaged view' was
achieved through using real materials from modern society and presented a satirical panorama of Weimer society. These
ideas are related to Benjamin's arguments that 'instead of being based on ritual, art begins to be used on another practice
– politics' and 'mechanical reproduction of art changes the reaction of the masses towards art'.

It is also important to point out the following quote from Zurich Dadaist Tzara's writing 'Dada; abortion of
logic, which is the dance of those impotent to create: Dada ; absolute and unquestionable faith in every god that is the
immediate product of spontaneity'. It seems that the basis of Dada to be in this unwillingness to impress meaning, and
the embrace of deep individual expression. However, I argue that this is a unilateral viewpoint because this argument only
describes Zurich Dada. It is also important to notice that there were significant social differences between Zurich and Berlin
at the end of WW I: while Zurich had remained neutral and relatively prosperous, Berlin had experienced the revolution of
1918 and the establishment of the highly vulnerable Weimar Republic. Zurich Dadaists committed to the idea of
spontaneity and individual psychic freedom. The distinguishing feature of the Berlin group was the replacement of
the psychological account of emancipation with an overly political one. The Berlin Dada artist made overtly political claims and
made use of political and social satire in art.

Furthermore, there are two crucial components I found in Hoch's artwork. The first is that her artwork
epitomizes the Dada attitude towards war: it is chaos. The war itself is craziness incarnate destroying humanity. This
viewpoint really challenges the argument made by Benjamin, who argues that 'only war makes it possible to mobilize all of
today's technical resources while maintaining the property system'. The argument of Benjamin's writing provide a crucial
framework for thinking about the productions of new digital and media technologies. Benjamin's viewpoint is similar to
the Futurist artists who welcome war by promoting a new taste for the power of modern technology. However, Benjamin
also developed his own analysis to the art; he claims that “the concepts which are introduced into the theory of art in what
follows differ from the more familiar terms in that they are completely useless for the purposes of Fascism. They are, on
the other hand, useful for the formulation of revolutionary demands in the politics of art”. I assume that Benjamin's
response is derived from the historical development of capitalism and the technological development of art in the 1930s.
Benjamin seems to agree with the idea that Fascism introduces aesthetics into politics that giving the masses a chance to
express themselves. The second important feature of Hoch's artwork is that she responds to the capitalist production by
organizing the photomontage of Einstein's head and the masses of people, this arrangement reveals that she was
concerned with the relations between social superstructure and sub-structure in terms of the mode of production.

Although Dada is an international art movement, artistic response to it were stylistically diverse. In an effort
to defy rational cultural norms, Dada artists undermine all the characteristics of formal art convention: aesthetic standards
and reason. Also, many Dada artists turned to 'chance' to create their art. As a result, it created a most ironic and powerful
language to reveal their attitudes toward the real world.

3 Benjamin,1935
4 Tzara, 2003, p.256
5 Benjamin, 1935